DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 377 499 CS 214 666

AUTHOR Bowers, Bradley R.
TITLE Virginia Woolf: Postmodern Writing Instructor.
PUB DATE Apr 94
NOTE 22p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the College English Association (25th, Orlando, FL, April 7-9, 1994).
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Historical Materials (060)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Diachronic Linguistics; *Females; Feminism; Higher Education; *Language Usage; *Punctuation; *Sex Role; *Writing (Composition); Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Author Text Relationship; *Ellipsis; Historical Background; *Woolf (Virginia)

ABSTRACT

In her much-quoted statement of principles "A Room of One's Own," Virginia Woolf wishes for "a woman's sentence." In that essay, she doubts that a woman can use the same sentence as a man to write literature, because "the weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully." If no definition has been formulated of what exactly constitutes, or identifies, or distinguishes a woman's sentence from any other, inquiry in this area nevertheless behooves the writing instructor. A key to the concept of "a woman's sentence" is Woolf's judgment that a sentence of this sort needs to combat the stifling oppression of naming, of predicative logic, of linearity: "Better it would be, we feel, to leave a blank or even to outrage our sense of probability than to stuff the crevices with this makeshift substance." Both the ellipsis and the dash have interesting histories in the English language, having only been distinguished from each other in the mid-19th century. About this time George Meredith comments through the narrative persona in "The Tragic Comedians" that the ellipsis is a unique expression of the female mind. Indeed, the ellipsis may well be an originally feminine incursion into, or subversion of, the patriarchal language in which a woman must write. Only occasionally in Woolf's writing does the ellipsis just mean that something has been left out. In her novels, the ellipsis shows "how definitely, by not saying something, she says it." (Contains 52 references.) (TB)

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Virginia Woolf: Postmodern Writing Instructor

Bradley R. Bowers

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"Better it would be, we feel, to leave a blank or even to outrage our sense of probability than to stuff the crevices with this makeshift substance" (101-02)

--Virginia Woolf, "Phases of Fiction," 1929

In her much-quoted statement of principles *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf wishes for "a woman's sentence." In that essay, she doubts that a woman can use the same sentence as a man to write literature, because "the weight, the pace, the stride of a man's mind are too unlike her own for her to lift anything substantial from him successfully" (79). In "Phases of Fiction," written in the same year, Woolf again expresses her desire for a particularly feminine form of sentence, a form of discourse which in contemporary terms has come to be called écriture feminine. Yet no definition has been formulated of what exactly constitutes, or identifies, or distinguishes a woman's sentence from any other. A key to the concept of "a woman's sentence" is Woolf's judgment that a sentence of this sort needs to combat the stifling oppression of naming, of predicative logic, of linearity: "Better it would be, we feel, to leave a blank or even to outrage our sense of probability" (101). She is objecting to what she calls in *A Room of One's Own* the "older forms of literature," those which have "hardened and set" through the centuries; she traces them from her pen back through her literary ancestors Thackeray, Dickens, and Balzac who, she argues, simply inscribed the same "forms" handed down from their literary forebears "Johnson, Gibbon and the rest" (78-80).

Her assertion of what is "better" than traditional narrative appears in this statement as two straightforward concepts: first, leaving a blank is better; second, outraging (or violating) a probable sequence of events is better. She writes as preface to this remark that narrative art, or "storytelling," should convey truth, yet

> the conditions of storytelling are harsh; they demand that scene shall follow scene, that party shall be supported by another party, one parsonage by another parsonage; that all shall be of the same calibre; that the same values shall prevail. If we are told here that the palace was lit by gas, we must be told there that the manor house was

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> faithful to the oil lamp. But what will happen if, in process of solidifying the entire body of his story, the novelist finds himself out of facts or flagging in his invention? Must he then go on? Yes, for the story has to be finished: the intrigue discovered, the guilty punished, the lovers married in the end. The record, therefore, becomes at times merely a chronicle. Truth peters out into a thin-blooded catalogue. ("Phases" 101)

The linearity interferes; the reductiveness of the language stifles the fullness of Woolf's intentions: "Quality is added to quality, fact to fact, until we cease to discriminate and our interest is suffocated under a plethora of words" ("Life and the Novelist" 45). Woolf reiterates this idea in her diary in 1935. Commenting on the technique of satire under the title "Ideas that struck me," Woolf writes "That the more complex a vision the less it lends itself to satire" and then continues in a broader sense, that "the more it understands the less it is able to sum up & make linear" (*Diary 4:* 309). She objects repeatedly in *A Room of One's Own* to the idea that narrative need be linear, offering early in that essay a practical, parenthetical justification: "I give you my thoughts as they come to me" (6). Much later in the essay, in her attempt to define a woman's sentence, Woolf adds, "Moreover, a book is not made of sentences laid end to end, but of sentences built, if an image helps, into arcades or domes" (80). And this idea--an image of shapes, arcades and domes--arises in her earlier "Anatomy of Fiction" (1919) as she reflects on the art of Jane Austen: "Between the sentences, apart from the story, a little shape of some kind builds itself up" (54). And in the same vein as her later objection to linearity, probability, and sequential structure, she admires in Austen's art "how exquisitely one incident relieves another" (54). Woolf then elaborates on this observation with a suggestion that invoking truth into a narrative depends not only on a non-linear style, but on an ability to avoid the reductive nature of words, as she further says of Austen, "how definitely, by not saying something, she says it" (54). Woolf's comments are coupled with a reciprocal attack on a contemporary book by Clayton Hamilton, *Materials and Methods of Fiction*, of which she complains that "according to him every work of art can be taken to pieces, and those pieces can be named and numbered, divided and sub-divided, and given their order of preference, like the internal organs of a frog" (54). Woolf mocks Hamilton's treatise on "how to write":

> There is the complication, the major knot, and the explication; the inductive and the deductive methods; the kinetic and the static; the direct and the indirect with subdivisions of the same; connotation, annotation, personal equation, and denotation; logical sequence and chronological succession--all parts of the frog and all capable of further dissection. (54-5)

Woolf continues the analogy to make her point clearly: "you may dissect your frog, but you cannot make it hop; there is, unfortunately, such a thing as life" (55). Woolf strongly argues against a reductive approach to writing, against a belief that the words can capture the entire meaning, that they can pin a living frog to the page. In an early London Times article, "Impressions at Bayreuth," she tries to articulate that ineffable quality of art and suggests that music can achieve the transcendent quality which she seeks in writing by what is not present:

> The more beautiful a phrase of music is the richer its burden of suggestion, and if we understand the form but slightly, we are little restrained in our interpretation. We are led on to connect the beautiful sound with some experience of our own, or to make it symbolize some conception of a general nature. Perhaps music owes something of its astonishing power over us to this lack of definite articulation; its statements have all the majesty of a generalization, and yet contain our private emotions. (21)

But in *A Room of One's Own* she provides an illustrative example of exactly how she attempts to duplicate the power of music, to articulate without language, to express without words. Her subject is once again "truth," and she is musing upon the difference between her pre-war and post-war existence:

> Nothing was changed; nothing was different save only--here I listened with all my ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it--the change was there. Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves. Could one set that humming noise to words? (12)

After Woolf laments the loss of that humming, she turns in the essay to the poetry of Tennyson and Christina Rossetti and discovers only a romanticized illusion which had since been replaced--because of the war--by the ugly truth of reality, an ugliness of the current human condition: "So ugly they looked--German, English, French--so stupid" (12). And here she directly addresses the nature of the ellipsis in her own writing, for she refers to the device by name--by the name of "dots"--and provides both an example of its use and an explanation: "Why, if it was an illusion,

not praise the catastrophe, whatever it was, that destroyed the illusion and put truth in its place? For truth . . . those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham. Yes indeed, which was truth and which was illusion, I asked myself" (15). Those dots come up again in an essay Woolf wrote for broadcast in 1937, for a series entitled "Words Fail Me." She is talking of "Craftsmanship" of language and argues that "words are not useful" because "it is their nature not to express one simple statement but a thousand possibilities" (127). She suggests an alternative language--a new form of language--based on the system of signs used then by writers such as the author of the Michelin Guide, the travel guide which evaluates hotels. He or she needs no words; they are "beside the point." The writer "sticks to signs; one gable; two gables; three gables. That is all he says and all he needs to say" (127). Woolf finds that in this "sign language" three of the same sign indicate the best; Baedeker, she says, simplifies the "sublime realms of art" in a similar manner: "when, in his opinion, it is a work of transcendent genius, three black stars shine on the page, and that is all" (128). And though her tone is whimsical, the desire for a different form of writing is apparent; she desires that "the whole of literary criticism could be reduced to the size of a sixpenny bit--there are moments when one could wish it" (128). And she looks forward to the day when a writer will be able to convey actions, silence and dialogue "not in words, but in signs":

> When the novelist is forced to inform us that John rang the bell; after a pause the door was opened by a parlourmaid who said, "Mrs. Jones is not at home," he will to our great gain and his own comfort convey that repulsive statement not in words, but in signs--say, a capital H on top of the figure three. (128)

Signifying Nothing

The ellipses under consideration are, importantly, authorial silences; the ellipses used to punctuate dialogue are twice removed from the authorial voice. And to distinguish these meaningful silences from mere gaps in the text, we must first account for the sign called ellipsis and distinguish it from its parent, the dash. The concept of an ellipsis in written language has existed almost as long as written language, but the ellipsis under discussion has existed as an orthographic symbol . . . those three dots . . . for little more than one century. In that time, the ellipsis has become a much-used

tool in literary works. Is it merely punctuation? No, for an author has no need for a mark which indicates an omission, unless the omission itself is meant to be a part of the text. Does it literally represent only the implied words which are apparently left out? No, for an author has no need to imply only the words which could be present in the text; their absence speaks as loudly as their presence. The ellipsis perhaps cannot be called a "word," but it can be, and in Woolf's works must properly be, called a "sign." More precisely, it may be designated a "morpheme" by definition and, more relevantly, a non-word morpheme.

The ellipsis mark functions as a morpheme, defined as the smallest meaningful unit of language. The ellipsis must be further defined as a bound morpheme, one which cannot express meaning without the help of at least one other morpheme for context. And it is useful at this point to consider the ellipsis as a sign, and consider how the value, or meaning, of that sign is constituted. In his seminal work, Ferdinand de Saussure illustrates this process by suggesting an analogy from the game of chess:

> When is a knight a knight? Is it still an element in the game, if you carry it around in your pocket? Certainly not, for by its material makeup--outside its square and the other conditions of the game--it means nothing to the player; it becomes a real concrete element only when endowed with value and wedded to it. (110)

An ellipsis mark by itself, without context, is simply a mark of punctuation; however, when it is placed into any context, it becomes meaningful in the same manner as other signs. Words may signify both sound and fury, but the ellipsis is, in essence, signifying nothing.

It is a particular kind of nothing; its meaning is bound to its context. Other signs in English share this quality with the ellipsis mark; they often are referred to as cranberry (or boysenberry or huckleberry) morphemes, a name derived from the most common examples, such as the word boysenberry. The morpheme #berry# is a simple and straightforward morpheme. However, the morpheme #boysen# is a nonce morpheme for the signified boysenberry ; it holds meaning only when bound to its context. The ellipsis mark, too, holds meaning only by deriving it from its context, as the boysen of boysenberry (and though the ellipsis may be considered a nonce morpheme, it obviously can express varied meanings). Charles Osgood, in his research toward

measuring the meaning of signs (inclusive here of the ellipsis), constructed a useful empirical model for illustrating the idea of contextual meaning in the abstract sense. He posits a three-dimensional geometric space, on which he plots the "meaning" of signs on the three axes (x, y, z). The axes represent the dominant factors by which signs acquire their meaning, and thus if x = 5, y = 8, and z = -2, one can plot the "meaning" as a point in semantic space. The usefulness of this model is limited to illustrating the relative meanings of signs, since no absolute scale has been established (and likely never will be). According to this theory, each sign has one or more points of meaning in semantic space. The entire lexicon of any language would fill the space with millions of points of meaning. Yet, the model would still contain millions of non-signified points of meaning: for example, the signified that is not quite a dog-point--in fact, not any kind of dog-point--and yet is still not quite a horse-point, again of any kind. Perhaps the sentence Woolf sought to create is one which falls into one of the many gaps where a sign has not yet been invented, where no man has named before.

So has a new meaning been created by the creation of a new sign? Or has a connection simply been made between the previously known points of meaning? In regard to the ellipsis, one cannot differentiate between a new meaning and a new connection between meanings unless one believes that all points of meaning have been mapped, that it is only left for scholars to decipher the words of wise men who inscribed it all before we arrived. To believe that the entire world of meaning has already been mapped and labeled is a medieval belief in a post-modern world. It is also to believe that the words themselves contain their meaning, that they denote in and of themselves, in Saussure's terms, that they carry value independent of their context. As Woolf speculates, in her essay on craftsmanship, that a new language will use signs--arbitrary signs--to indicate complex ideas, so Saussure argues for signs as a purely contextual system, a "system of pure values which are determined by nothing except the momentary arrangement of its terms" (80). Meaning is not embodied in words, or even in particular arrangements of letters. Even before Jacques Derrida undermined the notion of simple correspondences, Saussure had concluded that "a material sign is not necessary for the expression of an idea: language is satisfied with the opposition between

something and nothing" (86). This concept of "deferred presence," as Derrida calls it, leads him to coin a word--a sign--outside of language, and thus différance is only provisional; it only stands in as a substitute for what he cannot write. Woolf responded to the reductive naming process similarly, by avoiding traditional forms, by avoiding traditional words, by not naming, and by creating gaps which were stand-ins for what she could not write. She explains, "You cannot use a brand new word in an old language because of the very obvious yet mysterious fact that a word is not a single and separate entity, but part of other words. It is not a word indeed until it is part of a sentence" ("Craftsmanship" 130).

Treatise on Punctuation

Other marks of what is usually referred to as punctuation may have meanings and may correctly be called morphemes. But they are limited to one of several limited meanings, such as the period which at present means either "this sentence has ended" or "the preceding word is abbreviated." Other marks of punctuation may serve essentially as adverbs, such as the question mark indicating the interrogative mood or an exclamation point determining intensity. And while the dash--which was originally called by the name of "ellipsis"--does occasionally indicate that something has been omitted, that particular use has come to mean a literal deletion; otherwise, the dash now indicates only an abrupt change in the syntax. The present-day ellipsis evolved from the dash; in fact, until the mid-nineteenth century, the dash and the ellipsis were exactly the same mark of punctuation. Both terms signified a short stroke of the pen between words; that particular mark originally evolved from the stroke of a pen made to delete a word or item from a text.

The incorporation of this new mark into the English language indicates a fundamental change in the governing systems of syntax and grammar. The present major marks of English punctuation derive quite directly from early Latin and Greek devices used to mark speeches for pauses, pauses necessary for proper breathing during oration. The sense or syntax was usually of no concern as it related to punctuation. And these marks have changed hardly at all in the last two thousand years. Walter Ong cites numerous medieval sources, which draw their rules from Greek and Latin grammars dating to the Alexandrian schools of the third century B.C.:

> The marks of punctuation are invariably of three kinds: (1) the distinctio or positura proper, corresponding analogously to our present period; (2) the media distinctio (media positura, mora, submedia distinctio), sometimes analogous to our semicolon, sometimes to our colon, sometimes to our comma, and representing an intermediate pause between that of the distinctio proper and that of (3) the subdistinctio, which is for the most part analogous to our comma. (350)

The grammars, however, say nothing of using marks in accordance with, or to indicate, the grammar or syntax of a sentence. An anonymous Latin author noticed that the two systems sometimes coincided, and he was perhaps the first to notice that punctuation can be meaningful in itself. The *mora*, or intermediate pause, he writes, not only refreshes the reader (*reficit lectorem*) but also, by allowing the reader a moment to reflect on the sense, provides some insight into the meaning of what is marked (*sensibus lumen accommodat*); and breaking a sentence is certainly not an original idea; in the fourth century, Donatus, author of *Ars Grammatica*, an authoritative text for centuries thereafter, writes that a mark should be used to create a pause "toward the middle of the sentence" (qtd. in Ong 351). The specific purpose of the English marking system remains ambiguous and debatable to this day, though Ong's study leads him to suggest that by the nineteenth century, "Writers lean more and more toward a recognition of sense as a determinant of punctuation" (353). A seventh-century grammarian observed that the colon, comma, and period are used to mark off the sense of a sentence; Alcuin, two centuries later, says that pointing is used to make the sense clear. But the basis of the system--as a system of breathing points--persists into the seventeenth century and beyond. Ben Jonson's *Grammar* defines both the comma and the semicolon, not in terms of syntax or grammar as we understand them, but in terms of breathing. He writes that the colon is generally synonymous with a "full stay" or period; and the period is both "the distinction of the perfect sentence" and it "doth rest the spirit" (353, 357). The language had by then acquired two new marks which were not present in earlier forms of English, the "note" used to mark interrogation and the mark of "admiration" which is now defined by the term "exclamation." The determining factor of punctuation well into the English Renaissance continued to be breathing and the pauses it requires, despite the fact that many if not most texts were now read silently; Ong concludes that punctuation theory "never cut itself loose from the traditional view

of punctuation as basically a physiological rather than an elocutionary or a syntactical (logical) device" (360).

Because of this odd feature, punctuation remained chaotic well into the middle of the nineteenth century, following the sense or the syntax at times, but at others following the needs of the reader to breathe (or rest the spirit). Many sought to establish standards or to reform the system: one grammarian, tired of the battling schools of "high," or dense, pointing versus "light" pointing writes with assurance that he expects soon to see "the total exclusion of the colon, a point long since considered unnecessary"; William Cobbett argues in 1819 for the exclusion or at least restriction of the dash; however, Justin Brenan in 1829 would discard both the colon and semicolon, since he has "come to this conclusion as a general principle--that the punctuation of the parts or members of sentences, can be accomplished, with propriety and effect, by the comma and dash only " (qtd. in Honan 97-98). But it is John Wilson who sets the standard in the nineteenth century; his 1844 *Treatise on Grammatical Punctuation* goes through twenty editions before the twentieth century. His rules are fewer than most of his predecessors', and they are based upon grammatical principles rather than physiology or oration. The ellipsis, in the modern form of dots, has not yet been recognized, but the dash, one of Wilson's "Minor Points," may be used to indicate an omission (100).

The dash and the ellipsis did not become different punctuation marks until the late nineteenth century. But as late as 1824, Lindley Murray's *English Grammar* still makes no distinction between the terms, for at that time the word ellipsis literally meant a dash, a stroke of the pen. The dash, according to Murray, "may be introduced with propriety, where the sentence breaks off abruptly" and he adds that "a dash following a stop, denotes that the pause is to be greater than if the stop were alone" (247). The dash here denotes a pause or break, but not that anything has been left out. This early form of the ellipsis, though, again according to Murray, "is used when some letters in a word, or some words in a verse, are omitted: as 'The k--g' for 'the king'" (247).

Dash It All!

The dash itself was scorned upon its entry into literature as early as 1733, by the occasionally ornery Jonathan Swift: "In modern wit all printed trash is / Set off with num'rous breaks - - and dashes ----- " (524). But Swift himself is as guilty; in his poem "On the Irish Club," he ends with a purposeful omission represented by the "ur-ellipse"--a string of asterisks: "And 'tis against poetic rules / To rail at men by nature fools: / But * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * / * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * " (410). He also fills *A Tale of a Tub* with numerous breaks and dashes of a similar form. The Oxford English Dictionary at present defines the dash as "a horizontal stroke of varying length (--, ----, ------) used in writing or printing to mark a pause or break in a sentence, a parenthetic clause, an omission of words or letters or of the intermediate terms of a series, to separate distinct portions of matter, or for other purposes." According to this definition, the dash usually represents something readily ascertainable. In fact, the dash, during the nineteenth century, had taken on the role of censor; the OED illustrates usage of 1899 from Nicholas's *Idyl of Wabash*: "A dreadful thought which if put in print would have contained a dash."

Laurence Sterne, in *Tristram Shandy*, is of course one of, if not the first to take full advantage of the potentialities of punctuation over the literalness of words. Sterne's narrator relates the words of his Uncle Toby: "My sister, I dare say, added he, does not care to let a man come so near her ****. I will not say whether my Uncle Toby had compleated the sentence or not;--'tis for his advantage to suppose he had,--as, I think, he could have added no ONE WORD which would have improved it" (81). Woolf refers to these habits of Sterne's as his "extraordinary elasticity" in stretching the language beyond its normal limits ("Phases" 136). However, Sterne quickly imposes concrete meanings on this instance of "ellipsis" were it to be written in any of the other available manners: "Make this dash,----'tis an Aposiopesis.--Take the dash away, and write Backside,--'tis Bawdy.--Scratch Backside out, and put Cover'd-way in,--'tis a Metaphor" (81). Woolf also continued this sort of use as late as 1932, though usually in a mocking way. For example, in "A Letter to a Young Poet," she ends the entire essay with an ellipsis, suggesting that the remaining parts, those which she is leaving out, are "the intimate, the indiscreet, and indeed, the only really interesting parts of this letter. . . . " (144). But soon this new use of the ellipsis

goes the way of the old censorious dash, according to some; in 1949, grammarian George Summey remarks of the ellipsis as an indicator of indelicate and absent material, "This is not an important use" (*American Punctuation* 103).

The indeterminate meanings of punctuation allow Sterne to abuse the regularities of his contemporaries; the asterisk becomes his device to usurp the authority of the logical and linear sentence. He uses them frequently and plenteously to represent both censored language and unexpressed, or unexpressible, thoughts, but he writes only one actual ellipsis into the whole of *Tristram Shandy*. It may well be the first actual ellipsis ever printed in English, for it apparently evolved from the single-dotted period into a nonce use comprised of two dots, but in the following sentence became three dots used to indicate a character's expression of the concept of nothing; in an anecdotal aside, an anonymous corporal finds it difficult to express the concept of nothing--of his absolute absence of fear--with a substantive word, and so he says, "I value not death at all:--not this . . added the corporal, snapping his fingers,--but with an air which no one but the corporal could have given the sentiment.--In battle, I value death not this . . . and let him not take me cowardly" (292-93). This original ellipsis functions as a meaningful silence, a meaning which the reader must create: the snap of the fingers, the look in his eyes, the meaning of the pause which signifies the presence of absence, the positive value of nothingness.

These all take the form of the three dots; the ellipsis allows Sterne to represent in the text that which cannot be written. The pause created in the text will eventually show up as a standard device within written dialogue, but even Woolf herself used it consciously to indicate the authorial passage of time in meditative silence. In *A Room of One's Own*, she writes of the overwhelming obstacle which the British Museum presents in her "pursuit of truth"; she "opened a volume of the catalogue, and . . . . . the five dots here indicate five separate minutes of stupefaction, wonder and bewilderment" (26).

Signing the Dotted Line

As the twentieth century approached, things fell apart and the sentence could no longer hold; A *New English Dictionary* in 1897 defines the colon, not as a momentary resting point, but as a mark

"indicating a discontinuity of grammatical construction greater than that marked by a semicolon, but less than that marked by the period" (II 633, qtd. in Ong 354, n. 24). The origin of the word ellipsis is rooted in Latin, but does not become applied to the dots until the twentieth century. ("Dot" is not commonly used in the modern sense until the eighteenth century, first being derived from Old English dott, meaning "head of a boil." Until the beginning of the nineteenth century, dot in English still means a dowery, "a woman's marriage portion; the property which she brings with her, and of which the interest or annual income alone is under the husband's control" [OED].) But the ellipsis comes into its own during the nineteenth century, perhaps in part because of the popularity of letter-writing and the use of--perhaps ink-conserving--dots instead of dashes. The dash also performed the function of allowing one to pause during the composition of an essay or a letter without letting the ink completely dry on the nib of the pen. Thus informal writing of the nineteenth century is rife with dashes; however, increasingly--and perhaps in part because of the popularity of letter-writing--several dots often replace the stroke.

Soon after they appear, the dots flourish widely in writing of all kinds. Some uses even became distinguished from the "ellipsis dots" indicating a literal ellision in quoted material. Summey, in his 1919 *Modern Punctuation*, describes the separate marks which he calls "suspension periods" and which look exactly like ellipsis dots but "are definite signs of meditation" (59); these signs, he continues, "suggest a meditative pause" (64). It is a sign of how quickly this sign came into and out of popularity that in his new edition of 1949, called *American Punctuation*, Summey says that the signs, now called "suspension dots," "sometimes occur in articles in the better magazines, but belong specially to fiction and advertising" (109). (They are also called "French dots," deriving their English name from the French term points de suspension.) Now, Summey says that "They mark the preceding matter as unfinished, or left dangling an instant for attention" (109). The grammarian's description, in only thirty years, has evolved from that of a sign of "meditation" to that of a mark indicating that material has been left dangling for "an instant." Further, Summey includes a satirical passage full of ellipses by Don Marquis, which mocks their meaningfulness, and which appeared in the New York Evening Sun :

> Whenever you see . . . three little dots . . . such as these . . . in the stuff of a modern versifier . . . even in our stuff . . . it means that the writer . . . is trying to suggest something rather . . . well, elusive, if you get what we mean . . . and the reason he suggests it instead of expressing it . . . is . . . very often . . . because it is an almost idea . . . instead of a real idea . . . (109)

In 1947, E. L. Thorndike also mocks their abuse by undisciplined writers of the times, disagreeing with Summey's early definition of the suspension periods as "meditative pauses":

> This is perhaps still true of cultured writers and cautious writing; but it is certainly not true of the mystery stories I examined. Whatever '. . .' means to their writers and readers, it is rarely meditation. The most extreme devotion to '. . .' that I have encountered is in Superman, a picture-story magazine that charms millions of childish minds, young and old. The frequency of '. . .' in samples of it is over 90 per thousand, three times the frequency in H. G. Wells! (226, n. 6)

The significance of punctuation to meaning became a matter of great debate following the publication of Percy Simpson's *Shakespearian Punctuation* in 1911, a discussion of the changes wrought upon Shakespeare by printers and emendators. Shakespeare himself writes of punctuation on occasion. In *The Merchant of Venice*, Salarino urges Solanio to finish his thought: "Come, the full stop" (III, i, 17); in other words, get to the point. And in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare even suggests the idea of elliptical sentence construction as a more meaningful way to communicate, when Theseus tells Hippolyta of some less-than-warm welcomes he has received: "Where I have seen them shiver and look pale, / Make periods in the midst of sentences, / Throttle their practis'd accent in their fears, / And, in conclusion, dumbly have broke off, / Not paying me a welcome" (V, i, 96-99). Shakespeare, well before Beckett and Pinter, realized that a dramatic silence could contain more meaning than mere words; Theseus assures Hippolyta that he can do as much: "Trust me, sweet, / Out of this silence yet I pick'd a welcome / And in the modesty of fearful duty / I read as much as from the rattling tongue / Of saucy and audacious eloquence" (99-103).

Between the Speech Acts

Woolf was not the first to notice the nuances of language created by the chosen forms. George Meredith, another author Woolf mentions often in her letters and diaries, paid attention to the

implications and possibilities raised by punctuation, as early as 1881. He comments through his narrative persona on its importance, and interestingly, aligns the meaning of the ellipsis with the unique expressions of the female mind:

> Dots are the best of symbols for rendering cardisophistical subtleties intelligible, and as they are much used in dialogue, one should have now and then permission to print them. Especially feminine dialogue referring to matters of the uncertain heart takes assistance from troops of dots; and not to understand them at least as well as words, when words have as it were conducted us to the brink of expression, and shown us the precipice, is to be dull, bucolic of the marketplace. (*The Tragic Comedians* 66)

Meredith, in the same novel in which he comments on the ambiguity of dots, contrasts them with the dash. His illustration suggests the distinction of the dots from the dashes, which will soon follow when the dash no longer will be called an ellipsis: his omniscient narrator says of the troubled heroine, Clotilde, "Perhaps, for the sake of peace . . . after warning him . . . her meditations tottered in dots. But when the heart hungers behind such meditations, that thinking without language is a dangerous habit" (130). The man suggests that a woman's thoughts, "without language," may be dangerous. His explanation (which follows) also illustrates the meaning, or meaningfulness, which the ellipsis is acquiring; he does so in a manner and tone not unlike the sarcasm of Woolf herself. Meredith not only indicates that the ellipsis represents the inexpressible feminine thought, but he also suggests that the dash--in pre-Freudian yet extremely phallic terms--bursts in upon the bewildered damsel who needs to be rescued from her own meditations. The dash represents the usurper of the feminine dots, the "haven" of masculine resolve, the "animal" instinct. The narrator continues:

> for there will suddenly come a dash usurping the series of tentative dots, which is nothing other than the dreadful thing resolved on, as of necessity, as naturally as the adventurous bow-legged infant pitches back from an excursion of two paces to mother's lap; and not much less innocently within the mind, it would appear. The dash is a haven reached that would not be greeted if it stood out in words. Could we live without ourselves letting our animal do our thinking for us legibly? We live with ourselves agreeably so long as his projects are phrased in his primitive tongue, even though we have clearly apprehended what he means, and though we sufficiently understand the whither of our destination under his guidance. No counsel can be saner than that the heart should be bidden to speak out in plain verbal speech within us. For want of it, Clotilde's short explorations in Dot-and-

> Dashland were of a kind to terrify her, and yet they seemed not only unavoidable, but foreshadowing of the unavoidable to come. (130-31)

Meredith's comments seem to predict that terrifying haven of thought which Woolf will find awaiting her, that maddening condition of involuntary inarticulation.

Throughout her fiction, whether in the novels or the short sketches, Woolf searches for that truthful method of recording life. But as she attempts to capture reality, and as she often complains of in her work, she always finds the language lacking; she struggles with the impediments of words and particularly with the "man's sentence." She discovers one way to avoid that sentence; she simply does not allow it to be carried out. Her dissatisfaction with language, especially the novels of male writers of her own time, was longstanding; as early as 1917, she complained that she found the form of the novel to be, perhaps like men, "frightfully clumsy and overpowering" (*Letters II*: 167).

Woolf was surrounded by the very forms of thought which she objected to in her literary (and literal) ancestors. The preservation of these forms may be traced directly into the rooms on Brunswick Square, to the core of the Bloomsbury group and its anti-romantic rationalism, its reductive literalness. Roger Poole argues that none exemplified this mindset more than Leonard Woolf and that the strict adherence to traditional logic led to

> a naivete which is the conscious and chosen result of excluding all parameters of thinking which are not strictly logical or deductive. And nowhere is this self-imposed set of limitations more evident than in those pages of his autobiography where he writes of his wife's 'insanity.' (63)

Leonard indicates that his wife's insanity showed up as well in the irrational nature of her punctuation; he would often "correct" Virginia's works according to his own authority, by which he means that he "punctuated them and corrected obvious verbal mistakes" (Preface, *The Death of the Moth* viii). He adds that he always revised Virginia's manuscripts "in this way" though she presumably had final editorial authority while alive. In his autobiography, in fact, Leonard always, always uses "correct" punctuation, and never, ever (even in his own fictional writing)

finds the need for an ellipsis (except to indicate the literal ellision in his quotations of Virginia's diaries).

But he does find one other remarkable use for the ellipsis. When he quotes from Virginia's diaries, he changes the punctuation; from an entry of January 7, 1923, he removes two full stops and regularizes all other supposed aberrations. But oddly, his changes do not stop there. Virginia had used no ellipses, but she did use several dashes, a mark which Leonard found useful in his own work. One of Virginia's dashes is simply removed. But two dashes function in her text to represent either censored or inarticulable thoughts: "Arnold Bennett thinks me wonderful &--&--(these, no doubt, were elements in my hilarity)" (*Diary II:* 223). The context of the entry is a description of a typically ribald and rambunctious Bloomsbury social gathering; the suggestion of the dashes in her diary is rather apparently that Bennett is projecting unrepeatable--unspeakable?--thoughts toward and about her which she either cannot articulate or comfortably write in her diary. Leonard's version is regularized for spelling and punctuation, but, inexplicably, the dashes have become ellipses: "Arnold Bennett thinks me wonderful and ... and ... (these, no doubt, were elements in my hilarity)" (*Downhill All The Way* 116). Apparently, Leonard wished to represent the meaning of the missing elements not as something known by Virginia but censored in her writing, but as something not censored, but simply unknown by Virginia. But the content of the entry argues that Virginia was not unaware of what she meant by those dashes, and they could easily have been written as ellipses if this were a later entry, for they represent an unspoken, perhaps indeterminate perception. The structure of the thought is elliptical, and Leonard, following the advice of the OED, determined those thoughts to be "defective, lacking a word or words which must be supplied to complete the sense"; but Leonard did not have the right words any more than Virginia did to articulate those slightly uncomfortable thoughts of Arnold Bennett toward his wife. Leonard was led to use the ellipsis--in fact, was able to use the ellipsis--only to express Virginia's silenced thoughts.

The Life Sentence

The term Woolf coined, "a woman's sentence," still has not been sufficiently defined despite wide-ranging attempts, from empirical linguistics to intuitive poetics. On the one hand, in the words of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, "no serious research into empirical linguistics has definitively disclosed what might be the special traits of 'a woman's sentence' or has even revealed those secondary sexual characteristics which define Woolf's normative 'man's sentence'" (229). For example, Gilbert and Gubar cite the linguistic research of Robin Lakoff, which supposedly had provided tangible, empirical "proof" of the feminine tag-question as a linguistic manifestation of male domination and female submission. But, as with other presumably hard evidence, the experimentation falls into the wish-fulfillment trap of arguing an a priori case. The supposedly feminine, supposedly submissive tag-question of "It's a nice day, isn't it?" can easily be interpreted as the feminine, coercively dominant tag-question, "You're going to bed now, aren't you?" as Laurie A. Finke, among others, has recently suggested ("Bakhtin's 'Antilinguistics'"). On the other end of this spectrum, some highly regarded feminist writers struggle to represent the idea of a "woman's language" by approaching the concept poetically. Gilbert and Gubar call these attempts "immoderately mystical," citing Luce Irigaray's description of women's language as always "in the process of weaving itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them" (230). But what frustrates those working across this spectrum is one inescapable fact: one language is used by two genders; thus, separating out specific language behaviors according to gender is necessarily a text-specific analysis. No generalization to either gender as a whole can be possible. This impediment to conceptualizing an écriture feminine can be easily removed by a recognition that the female anatomy does not necessarily create "a woman's sentence." A female's situation or psychology may indeed create a different approach to, or form of, language, but that trait or traits must be shared by any who are a part of that subset. If woman's language is a subset of the language as a whole (which is, by default, man's language), then anyone who uses woman's language belongs to that subset. Therefore, obviously, the subset is comprised of those with a shared quality; in Woolf's case, those in the subset share a largely feminine trait of exclusion by a predominantly masculine,

authoritative, and linear language. As well, one must balance an analysis between the purely linguistic, quantitative approach on the one hand, and an abstract "immoderately mystical" conception on the other. In moderate terms, then, the ellipsis is an originally feminine incursion into, or subversion of, the patriarchal language in which a woman must write. One could say that a writer does not need an ellipsis in her narrative, for if she wished to leave something out, she could literally leave it out. If one then finds a mark of ellipsis, it means something. But only occasionally--in Woolf's writing--does it mean simply that something has been left out. In Woolf's novels, the ellipsis is "how definitely, by not saying something, she says it."

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